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Power and Peril: America's Supremacy and Its Limits; Pax Americana: Morocco's Fragile Democracy Tests U.S. Prescription for World; Openness Can Serve Extremists As Well as Thwart Them, Freest Arab Nation Learns; Busting a Heavy Metal Band

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Abstract (Article Summary)

Taking America's Measure The world confronting the U.S., 25 years ago and today Superpowers Then: U.S. and Soviet Union Now: U.S. U.S. foreign crisis Then: Hostages in Iran Now: Iraq, terrorism U.S. inflation (based on CPI) Then: 11.3% Now: 2.3% U.S. prime interest rate Then: 15.75%* Now: 4% U.S. national debt Then: \$845 billion Now: \$7 trillion U.S. budget deficit Then: \$40.7 billion Now: \$477 billion (Est.) -- And as a percentage of GDP Then: 1.6% Now: 4.2% Percent of its oil needs that U.S. imports Then: 43.1% Now: 56.5% Percent of Treasury securities that are foreign-owned Then: 17.78% Now: 36.4% Number of West European currencies Then: 18 Now: 7** Japan's nominal growth rate*** Then: 8.0% Now: -0.7% -- Inflation-adjusted*** Then: 5.1% Now: 1.6% Military alliances Then: NATO (U.S. and 14 allies), Warsaw Pact (Soviet Union and East European satellites) Now: NATO: (U.S. and 18 allies) Nuclear-armed nations**** Then: 6 (U.S., U.K., Soviet Union, France, China and Israel) Now: 8 (U.S., U.K., Russia, France, China, Israel, India, and Pakistan) World population Then: 4.38 billion Now: 6.3 billion U.S. population Then: 225 million Now: 291 million -- And as a percentage of world population Then: 5.1% Now: 4.6% Conflict in Afghanistan Then: Soviets invaded, U.S. supported Islamic guerrillas Now: Islamic guerrillas oppose U.S.-backed government Number of democracies in world***** Then: 43 Now: 120 * Year's high ** Euro, pound, Swiss franc, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic kroners *** Figures are from April 1979 to March 1980 and from April 2002 to March 2003 **** According to the Center for Strategic & International Studies. North Korea has said it is making atomic weapons but U.S. hasn't confirmed this. ***** According to a [Bush] speech in Washington, Nov. 6, 2003 Source: WSJ research

Full Text (1852 words)

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[First in a Series]

CASABLANCA, Morocco -- A onetime Marxist who endured torture and 16 years in jail, Driss Benzekri was

ushered into a lavish royal palace late last year to meet the son of his tormentor during Morocco's "years of lead," grim, gray decades of brutal oppression.

Mohammed VI, Morocco's monarch since the death of his autocratic father in 1999, wanted to talk about human rights, democracy and what he called "the thorny issue" of the past.

As a result of the unusual encounter, Morocco this month launched the Arab world's first "truth commission." Led by Mr. Benzekri, the former political prisoner, it already has a mountain of files to examine detailing 13,000 cases of abuse, from beatings to disappearances.

The initiative is part of a rare, though halting, experiment in Arab democracy. It's one that President Bush, in a speech the same day the king met with Mr. Benzekri, hailed as a sign that "governments across the Middle East and North Africa are beginning to see the need for change." Political opening, Mr. Bush said, will cure the scourge of terrorism, because "in every region of the world, the advance of freedom leads to peace."

Is that logic quite so simple? The truth commission was supposed to start its work last summer, but it was stalled by a violent jolt to Morocco's faith in the healing powers of openness. A wave of suicide bombers hit a restaurant, a hotel and other targets in Casablanca, killing 33, besides themselves, and raising a prickly question: Why, in what may be the Arab world's freest country, had extremism found such fertile ground?

Democracy has had a good run in the past decade and a half. It put down roots, albeit often shallow, across much of the former Soviet Union. It swept apartheid from South Africa, communism from Eastern Europe, dictatorships from South America and political machines from Taiwan, Indonesia and South Korea. Yet democracy has sometimes empowered the intolerant. The big winner in a December election in Serbia, for instance, was an ultranationalist party allied with ex- President Slobodan Milosevic, now on trial in The Hague for war crimes.

The perils are especially keen in Muslim lands, where fervent Islamists are often the only organized alternative to entrenched and frequently corrupt elites. In Iraq, the U.S. wrestles with the influence of clerics from the Shiite Muslim majority, including some radicals who want a rigid theocracy. Others don't push for this but insist on direct elections likely to be dominated by sectarian passions. And here in Morocco, after the suicide attacks, King Mohammed VI, in a somber television address, pinpointed the cause in those "who take advantage of democracy . . . to sow seeds of ostracism, fanaticism and discord."

Reworking Woodrow Wilson's dictum after World War I, America under Mr. Bush says it wants to make Iraq and other Islamic countries safe for democracy. But is such a world safe for America?

This is the first in a series of articles exploring America's dominant place in the world and the limits to it. The way America interacts with other nations is more tangled, and crucial to ordinary Americans, than at perhaps any other time since the Cold War. A war on terrorism pits the U.S. against zealots with tentacles in the Mideast, Europe, Asia and Africa. The Bush administration is embroiled in difficult nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq, and facing urgent issues of when to turn over power to Iraqis and how. Even spheres once thought largely domestic, such as the economy and jobs, are ever more international as business globalizes and big players such as China and India loom.

That America is now pre-eminent among nations is beyond doubt. It spends more on arms than Europe, China and Russia put together. Its economy is twice as big as that of Japan, its closest rival country. The U.S. no longer has reason to tremble before such threats as a menacing Soviet Union or a Japanese economic juggernaut. Little wonder the term "empire" is a frequently heard, though imprecise, shorthand for America's stature today.

Yet the U.S. is a much-frustrated giant. The Chinese balk at its trade prescriptions. Economically hapless North Korea thumbs its nose over nuclear weapons and goes about its business of selling missiles. Violent guerrillas resist the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq, while vast numbers of ordinary Muslims around the world doubt America's good will toward them. Even among traditional allies in Europe, U.S. policies often alienate rather than inspire.

This series explores how some of the very sources of America's great power also, in certain ways, constrain it. Consider the core American principles of democracy and free markets. These unquestionably strengthen U.S. society. And, confident in these values, the U.S. seeks to spread them. Yet at home and abroad, they also can create vulnerabilities.

America's open economic system creates a boundless thirst for imported goods, oil and capital from places such as China and Saudi Arabia -- habits that improve many Americans' lives in the short term but also pose a long-run threat. The rapid growth of China and India, eager participants in the U.S.-dominated global economy, could eventually yield new rivals to American economic might.

U.S. democracy, meanwhile, empowers individuals and interest groups -- from big corporations to ambitious Christian evangelists -- but sometimes in ways that impinge upon foreign policy.

America's self-image as a democratic republic resolutely opposed to imperialism makes it uneasy with the burdens of conquest, leaving private contractors to take on tasks the government prefers to keep at arm's length. This approach bedevils U.S. efforts to guard Iraq's infrastructure and rebuild Afghanistan's.

To counter terrorism from abroad, the U.S. now explicitly seeks to seed democracy in closed Mideast societies from which the threat springs. Yet incipient democracy, as Morocco shows, can empower fanatics as well as moderates. In all these ways and others, some threats to continued U.S. pre-eminence are self-generated, based in America's unusual status as a nation that is both a superpower and democratically governed.

Morocco, just seven miles from Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar, stands at the westernmost rim of the Arab world in both geography and outlook. With real elections and a robust media, it is a laboratory for the interplay between extremism and reform, and also for Washington's ambitions.

For Andre Azoulay, a Moroccan Jew who serves as a senior economics policy maker, the country's relative openness best explains why Islamist terrorists struck. "We are their anti-model," he said. As he spoke in an office down the hall from Morocco's monarch, a caller phoned with unpleasant news: al Jazeera, the Qatar-based Arab TV channel, was broadcasting a rant against Mr. Azoulay and his boss, the king. Mr. Azoulay turned on his TV set and watched as Hani Sebai, an Egyptian radical living in London, labeled Morocco a den of anti-Islamic vice run by Jews and bogus Muslims. "It's very depressing," Mr. Azoulay said.

Islamist radicals have long fulminated against Moroccan deviations such as bars, unveiled women and mixed-sex beaches. In recent years, greater tolerance made intolerance mainstream: The fury acquired new force and a far wider audience as Morocco loosened controls on media and politics.

At times, even the state has fallen under the radicals' thrall. Facing pressure from Islamists, Casablanca police last year busted an alleged anti-Islamic Satanic cult. The target: heavy metal musicians.

Saïd Boudi, a 23-year-old bass-guitar player, says he was sitting at his parents' home on a Sunday afternoon when police rushed in, grabbing his compact discs, black T-shirts and a plastic skull ashtray. Fourteen musicians were jailed. In court, a judge asked them to chant their faith in Islam. They did but were still convicted of "acts against Islam." After a public outcry, all were finally released.

"Democracy opened the door to extremists," says Samira Sitail, director of news at 2M, a Casablanca-based television channel. Soon after the Casablanca attacks, a radical cleric in Tangier said the TV center deserved to get bombed. He was thrown in jail. Most Islamist politicians meanwhile have been thrown off the air. "I'm not going to serve up their soup," says Ms. Sitail, who gives those who do appear "30 seconds at the end instead of three minutes at the start."

The first country to recognize the fledgling American republic in 1777, Morocco began to open up a tightly sealed political system in the 1990s, in the last years of King Hassan II. This accelerated under his son Mohammed VI, who on taking over sold off some of his late father's limousines, drove his own car and, courtiers boasted, even stopped at red lights. He also allowed photographs of his unveiled wife, a computer engineer.

More important, he lifted a house-arrest order on a prominent Islamist leader, fired his father's feared security overlord and embarked on what Secretary of State Colin Powell, during a visit last month, called "bold reforms" to make elections, the press and society more open. A study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ranked Morocco as the most pluralistic of 13 Arab countries.

Old reflexes still twitch. A journalist drew a four-year jail sentence last May for insulting the king. (He was freed this month after a royal pardon.) Suspected Islamist radicals, meanwhile, have been rounded up en masse since the

suicide attacks, with 50 jailed for life and 16 given death sentences.

(MORE)

Taking America's Measure

The world confronting the U.S., 25 years ago and today

Superpowers

Then: U.S. and Soviet Union

Now: U.S.

U.S. foreign crisis

Then: Hostages in Iran

Now: Iraq, terrorism

U.S. inflation (based on CPI)

Then: 11.3%

Now: 2.3%

U.S. prime interest rate

Then: 15.75%*

Now: 4%

U.S. national debt

Then: \$845 billion

Now: \$7 trillion

U.S. budget deficit

Then: \$40.7 billion

Now: \$477 billion (Est.)

-- And as a percentage of GDP

Then: 1.6%

Now: 4.2%

Percent of its oil needs that U.S. imports

Then: 43.1%

Now: 56.5%

Percent of Treasury securities that are foreign-owned

Then: 17.78%

Now: 36.4%

Number of West European currencies

Then: 18

Now: 7**

Japan's nominal growth rate***

Then: 8.0%

Now: -0.7%

-- Inflation-adjusted***

Then: 5.1%

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Military alliances

Then: NATO (U.S. and 14 allies), Warsaw Pact (Soviet Union and East European satellites)

Now: NATO: (U.S. and 18 allies)

Nuclear-armed nations****

Then: 6 (U.S., U.K., Soviet Union, France, China and Israel)

Now: 8 (U.S., U.K., Russia, France, China, Israel, India, and Pakistan)

World population

Then: 4.38 billion

Now: 6.3 billion

U.S. population

Then: 225 million

Now: 291 million

-- And as a percentage of world population

Then: 5.1%

Now: 4.6%

Conflict in Afghanistan

Then: Soviets invaded, U.S. supported Islamic guerrillas

Now: Islamic guerrillas oppose U.S.-backed government

Number of democracies in world*****

Then: 43

Now: 120

* Year's high

** Euro, pound, Swiss franc, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic kroners

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